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Middle East

What's Happening in Raqqa, Idlib and in Syria

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You may have seen the horrible photo of 34 day-old Samar Dofdaa that activists circulated recently. Her family is one of thousands under siege in Eastern Ghouta by Assad forces. The baby was skeletal and in obvious agony. She died the next day. While world attention has left Syria, civilian suffering continues, but so does the remaining popular resistance.

The war continues and the suffering does not diminish on the ground. The Russian and Syrian air forces have intensified their bombing since September in support of the pro-regime troops' military campaigns assisted by pro-Iranian Shi'a Islamic fundamentalist militias and Hezbollah in several regions: Deraa, Deir ez-Zor, Hama, Homs, Eastern Ghouta, Idlib. In the eastern Ghouta region, more than 1,100 children have suffered from acute malnutrition in the past three months, UNICEF said. This area has been besieged by regime's forces since 2013. No less than 397 civilians, including 206 children and 67 women, have died due to starvation and medication shortage particularly between the start of the siege in Eastern Ghouta in October 2012 and Oct. 22, 2017. Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of Syrian Network for Human Rights declared regarding this situation:

"It is not only that the Syrian regime used siege as a mean of warfare, but the siege is now beyond military necessities and their proportions, as the siege has turned into a matter of starving and restricting civilians. Its cost is higher than any anticipated military objective, and has become a form of collective punishment that denied civilians basic services and food."

On Oct. 24, Russia vetoed a UN Security Council draft resolution to extend by one year the investigation on the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Russia has rejected a renewal of the mandate of the UN experts and the OPCW (Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons) to investigate the use of chemical weapons in Syria. This is the ninth time Moscow has used its veto to protect its Syrian ally.

The United States is also not left out with its bombings in their so-called "war on terror" and especially in the campaign for the conquest of Raqqa. According to the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (SOHR), more than 3,000 civilians and soldiers died in September alone, the deadliest month of the year. Many essential infrastructures have also been destroyed, including multiple hospitals in areas outside the control of the regime and Islamic State (IS).

War torn destruction in Raqqa and Syria

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Raqqa, IS defeated, but ...

The IS was definitively expelled from the city of Raqqa in mid-October by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of fighters (Kurds, Arabs, Syrians) dominated by the YPG, armed wing of the PYD, with the support of United States-led international coalition aviation after four months of intense fighting. The defeat of the jihadist group in Raqqa is certainly good news, but the cost in human terms, as in Mosul a few months ago, is terrible.

More than 80% of the city is destroyed and/or uninhabitable and basic infrastructure is now virtually non-existent. "The humanitarian crisis is more serious than ever," the NGO Save the Children said in a statement a few days before IS troops were expelled, with a serious shortage of food, medicine, electricity, drinking water, and basic

necessities. There are also no functioning medical facilities in the city and schools have long been closed.

In four months, the fighting killed between 1,300 and 1,800 civilians [1]. About 270,000 to 320,000 people have been displaced by the fighting and are living in miserable conditions in overcrowded camps in the outskirts of the city. They will not be able to return until the city is cleared of the mines and explosives scattered by the IS. Fourteen people were actually killed in the explosion of mines left in the ruins of Raqqa since IS's expulsion from the city.

With the loss of Raqqa, IS now controls only 10% of the Syrian territory " compared with 33% at the beginning of the year " of which more than half in the province of Deir Zor, close to that of Raqqa. IS is the target of two separate offensives in Deir Zor: one led by the regime's troops and its allies, supported by Russia, the other by the SDF supported by the United States. The province of Deir Zor has also suffered tremendously from these offensives and bombings. Since September 10, between 660 and 880 civilians have died, while more than 200,000 people have fled the province.

However, this succession of defeats has not prevented the IS from multiplying suicide operations and car bomb attacks in different regions of the country. The jihadist group has also increased the number of abuses against civilians in the areas in which its soldiers are withdrawing, for example, on Oct. 23, the IS has been accused of "executing at least 116 civilians" in the city of al-Qaryatayn in Homs Province before being expelled. Qaryatayn was once home to roughly 14,000 Syrian Muslims and Christians reliant on agriculture and government jobs in Damascus. When the town first fell to the IS in 2015, thousands of its residents fled for safety.

After the end of the military operations in Raqqa, large sections of the SDF left Raqqa for other regions, mainly for Deir Zor. The SDF announced that the city and its province would be part of a decentralized and federal Syria and that they intended to entrust the administration to a civil council, create a local police and protect the borders of the province from external threats.

The Raqqa civil council is composed of local dignitaries and was created six months ago under the guidance of the SDF. The council has a dual presidency, a man and a woman like the other SDF councils, led by Leila Mustafa, a Kurdish woman from the border town of Tel Abyad, mostly populated by Arabs, and her Arab counterpart Mahmoud al-Borsan, a former member of the Syrian parliament and a leader of the Walda tribe, who is influential in Raqqa.

The real dominant political force remains, however, the PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK. Huge portraits of PKK founder Abdullah Å-caln were actually displayed in Raqqa's central square, Naeem, during the announcement of SDF's victory, while SDF commanders dedicated the victory of Raqqa to Å-caln and all the women.

It is necessary to underline a certain fear and mistrust present among certain sectors of the local Arab population against the SDF. Some Syrian activists have even spoken of a new occupation ... [2]

Everything remains to be done in Raqqa to rebuild the city, help local people to resume a decent life and regain the trust of the local population.

On its side, the regime by the voice of its dictator Bashar al-Assad has promised to restore the authority of the state over the entire national territory, including Raqqa. For his part, the Minister for National Reconciliation, Ali Haidar, said that the future of Raqqa could be addressed "only within the framework of the final political structure of the Syrian state" in response to the communiqué of the SDF.

Idlib, but especially Afrin, in Ankara's horizon

The Turkish army deployed in Idlib province in northern Syria, setting up observation posts as part of a mission to control SDF, whereas initially, the mission was officially aimed at dislodging Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a military alliance dominated by the jihadists of Jabhat al-Nusra. HTS actually agreed not to interfere with Turkish operations along the border and is therefore relatively spared for the moment by Ankara.

This Turkish military deployment in collaboration with Syrian armed opposition groups is part of the so-called de-escalation agreements reached with Iran and Russia in September and May. This new military expansion at the border came three months after another one between Aazaz and al-Bab. The objective is to isolate the city of Afrin controlled by the SDF. The Turkish pro-government daily *Yeni Safak* did not hesitate to titrate use as a headline in one of its editions at this period: "Today Idlib, tomorrow Afrin." The Turkish government also placed in the areas opposition armed groups that it sponsors and supports. At the time of writing, the Turkish forces continued their incursions into the northern territories of the country.

As a reminder, Turkey occupies territories in the north of Syria, including towns and villages like Jarablus and al-Bab. They have even established their own institutions, favor their own humanitarian organizations, depriving others of acting, including local ones, and set up a local police trained in Turkey.

Popular resistances despite everything

This endless war against the Syrian people has not prevented popular resistance actions. On October 14, significant demonstrations took place in the provinces of Idlib, Homs, Eastern Ghouta and several other cities for the "day of rage," despite the bombardments of the regime and Russia and the threat of Islamic fundamentalist groups often opposed to these mobilizations and not hesitating to repress activists and other sectors of civil society.

A few days before, on October 11, a strike was organized by shopkeepers and workers in the city of Idlib demanding the resignation of the officials in the HTS-led civil authority in Idlib, and that the jihadist coalition's security forces remove the masks and hoods that conceal their identities. Increasing complains against HTS can be heard by the inhabitants of Idlib regarding the encroaching on almost every aspect of civilian life by the jihadist coalition. In recent months, HTS members continuously demonstrated intentions to impose control over civilian affairs: it has monitored money transfers, prohibited education projects that do not have its approval and sought control over bakeries, and water and transportation directorates in the province. HTS has committed numerous Human Rights violations in these past few months following their full control of the city and the province, including murders, arbitrary arrests, and raids relief organizations.

In addition, at the Central Prison in Homs, 500 political prisoners went on hunger strike in mid-October to demand international action for their release as they were under the threat of major repression by the regime. The prison's director has however continued to threaten the prisoners after their call and detainees reported that the prison director also threatened to burn them with their families. Several Syrian organizations demanded that the Syrian regime immediately accept the demands of hunger strikers, to end referring prisoners to military courts or other courts, such as "the Terrorism Court," and to stop all arbitrary executions. We should support the demands of the hunger strikers and moreover demand the liberation of all political prisoners.

Local popular and democratic initiatives were also continuing in different regions against the regime and Islamic fundamentalist organizations.

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The resilience of what remains of the sectors of the popular democratic movement against the multiple enemies of freedom and dignity is admirable in this atmosphere of continuous war, of which the end remains the absolute priority to lessen the suffering of the civilian population.

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[1] More than 1,000 civilians (1,058) died under US-led coalition bombings, 311 civilians by IS and 191 civilians by SDF. IS jihadists have also used many civilians as human shields.

[2] One can and should have a critical stance against the PYD and its authoritarian practices (see the many posts and articles on my blog Syria Freedom Forever on the issue), but the comparison with the practices of the jihadist group IS and talk about new occupation on the IS model ignores the real and massive differences between the two groups (including comparing the management of territories between the two organizations) and is more of a misplaced propaganda. For example, we should denounce when around 10 civilians were injured on October 26 after they got shot by SDF fighters after residents from "Al-Mashlab" neighborhood in Raqqa protested to demand SDF to allow them to go back to their homes, despite the lack of security as mentioned in the text.